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East Meets West in Paris

by Kris Kern

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Last year found my family and me in Paris amidst the crowds, French and foreign, gathered for the festivities celebrating the start of the year 2000. Since I cannot resist the temptation to visit libraries wherever I go, even on vacation, I had arranged to spend a morning in early January at a special academic research library: La Bibliotheque interuniversitaire des Langues orientales, or the Interuniversity Library of Oriental Languages (BIULO). Because of my work as an Arabic cataloger at Portland State University, my primary interest was visiting the library's Middle East collection. A listserv that Middle East librarians subscribe to provided a possible contact. Nathalie Rodriguez heads the library's African and Middle East Section. Nathalie also serves as the secretary for MELCOM, the Middle East Studies association in Europe, and she sends MELCOM e-mail notices, which I had seen, to complementary listservs. Before leaving Portland, Nathalie, and I had communicated by e-mail, fortunately in English, to schedule a time for a tour of the library.

Located on the Rue de Lille, a few blocks east of the Musee d'Orsay on the Left Bank of the Seine, the library is housed in the Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations. The Institute's facade is imposing, but unremarkable, and I spent a few moments deliberating on which of two doors to enter. Having chosen the most likely entrance, I took a flight of stairs and entered the library's small, plain reception area, where I seemed to be expected. Nathalie was notified of my arrival and came out to meet me. Welcoming and friendly, she made me feel immediately at home.

The Library's holdings today cover the geographic areas of the Middle East, Oceania, Asia, Central, Eastern and Nordic Europe, the Slavic nations, Africa, and Native American civilizations. More than 70 languages are represented in the nearly 600,000 monographs and 11,000 serials and periodicals the library owns. Some of the languages collected here are not found in other French libraries. Disciplines covered significantly by the collection are history, ethnography, literature, linguistics, exploration, social sciences, and humanities. The oldest treasures of the library include over 100,000 pieces from the 13th to the 19th century, and one thousand manuscripts. Additions to the collection continue systematically through purchases, gifts, and exchanges at the rate of approximately 11,000 per year.

We began by touring the simply-furnished reading rooms. Shelved here are basic works classified by language groups. Most of the collection is housed in the stacks or at other locations in or around Paris. A patron wishing to secure items from the stacks must complete a request form, for no more than three to five pieces in a half-day period. The wait for materials stored elsewhere can be as



Kris and her husband Michael on the Pont de Sully (view to the left bank).



Kris and Michael in front of the Eiffel Tower.

long as a week. There are plans for constructing a new, larger building in three or four years that would house the entire collection in one place. This would make it easier for patrons and library staff alike to use the library.

The library is accessible to all interested students and researchers. As an interuniversity library, it serves students from the Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, and three University of Paris branches with the presentation of a student identity card and photo identification. Other readers are required to present an identity card and photo ID in order to use the library. Students may check out newer materials, primarily monographs, for a renewable two-week period. Librarians determine items that may be photocopied or microfilmed. In general, the most fragile, rare pieces are not permitted to circulate or to be copied. The library is normally open during university terms on Monday, 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.; Tuesday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.; and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

One rather archaic feature of the library for those of us accustomed to integrated online catalogs is the use of several catalogs to list works in the collection. For example, Arabic script works can be found in four catalogs. The oldest card catalog lists material by author until September 1976, with many of the entries handwritten; a succeeding author card catalog lists items from September 1976; a subject catalog has works entered since 1967;

and, since last summer, the online catalog exists now that catalogers use the OCLC-Arabic software for producing records. The CD-ROM catalog AUROC contains all works in Western European languages entered since 1960, modern Turkish entries, and all works written in Roman characters recorded since 1989. Also found in AUROC are records for transliterated works in some non-Roman script languages entered in the last few years. The rest of the collection is recorded in card catalogs that vary in their coverage. For some language areas, such as Southeast Asia and China, both author and title catalogs exist for works recorded since 1967; for others, such as Eastern and Central Europe, there is a subject catalog of works entered since 1967. For good reason, researchers are encouraged to ask the librarians for assistance in finding material they want.

The library provides a number of useful CD-ROM research tools for its users: the French bibliographic databases MYRIADE; a national serials publications catalog that includes foreign serials received by French libraries and document centers; FRANCIS, a social science and economics article database covering periodicals, books, proceedings, reports and theses issued since 1972; and DOC-THESES, a catalog of theses defended in France since 1972. In addition, the National French Bibliography and the general catalog of the National Library of France both identify books published or printed in France. Intriguingly, a Hindi-English dictionary is also available on CD-ROM.

Some of the resources accessible through the Internet were familiar: LOCIS and First Search, including Books in Print, Social Science Abstracts and World Cat. PANCATALOGUE is a catalog listing works held by French university and interuniversity libraries. BN-OPALE is the online catalog for the National Library of France.

After we inspected the catalogs, electronic resources and public areas of the BUILO, Nathalie invited me to follow her into the stacks. So many antique and rare books to admire! Among the unique items representing the first Arabic printed texts found in the library are *Quatre Evangiles* in Arabic with a Latin translation published in Rome for the Medicis in 1591, and *Psaumes de David* printed in Aleppo in 1706, and reprinted in 1735 by Chouwair in Lebanon.

The original establishment of the library coincided with the foundation by Colbert in 1669 of a language school at the Capucin monastery of Pera in Constantinople to prepare young men as translators, who were indispensable for developing commerce with eastern nations. In 1700, another school began under the aegis of the Jesuits in Paris. Lacking the educational resources for teaching languages, teachers in Paris attempted to fill the gap by composing grammars and bilingual dictionaries. In the 19th century, newspapers from Constantinople and Egypt were acquired to introduce students to affairs of the Levant. For a number of reasons, both pragmatic and political, the results of these educational efforts were disappointing. At

the same time, at the end of the 18th century, a parallel entity, a special school of Oriental languages, was established by law and located within the national library near the oriental manuscripts. This institute taught literary and spoken Arabic, Turkish, Tartar, Persian and Malay. Over the next seventy years, with one exception, the school administrator was simultaneously the manuscript department conservator. Here also, students lacked books, the educational emphasis being on the classical rather than the contemporary world. In 1868, as the new head of the school, Charles Schefer enabled the transport of the school and its few books to the College de France and soon after to 2 rue de Lille, the present location of the library. The distance from the national library necessitated the immediate founding of a school library. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs moved the library from the original school for young men to the new location. A great period of development ensued, so that by the end of the century the library counted more than 50,000 volumes.


In the 20th century, supplementary space was procured at 4 rue de Lille, specialized librarians were appointed, and in the 1930s, the catalogs were entirely revised, favoring treatment in the native languages. An idea proposed 60 years earlier but erroneously abandoned, to classify books by languages, was adopted. After a slowdown caused by World War II, reconstruction and acquisitions resumed. In the 1960s a new phenomenon appeared in the growth of the number of students, not only at the Institute, which took its present name in 1975, but at universities which developed Oriental studies programs. After a period in which libraries established for satellite teaching sites diffused the library, in 1978 the library joined in the foundation of a group of large interuniversity libraries in Paris, such as the Sorbonne. The Bibliotheque des Langues Orientales became a communal service for three University of Paris branches and the Institut nationale des langues et civilisations orientales. In 1981, internal reconstruction allowed the reorganization and additions to the collections while preserving the classic façades and roofs of the building.

After perusing several floors of stacks, Nathalie introduced me quickly to the Arabic cataloger. Technical service areas tend to have many similar characteristics regardless of the size, location, or endowment of the library. I felt comfortable in the familiar clutter of computers, books to be cataloged, cataloging records, manuals and dictionaries.

Nathalie then ushered us into the office of the librarian responsible for overseeing the conservation work in the library. Before coming to Paris, I had expressed to Nathalie an interest in seeing the library's conservation efforts, and was most grateful for their thoughtfulness in preparing for my visit. A packet they had assembled for me included pictures taken of a badly worn Koran (19th century edition?) before it had been restored. The packet also held a copy of the restorer's description of the book's covers, cover flap, text, broken binding, evidence of water, dirt, stains, wrinkling and previous restoration. A brief

list of the restoration procedures followed this summation. Two additional pages in the packet consisted of photocopies displaying the entry for the Koran in the antique catalog book. One of my deepest regrets was my inadequate ability to speak with the preservation librarian during our discussion. Nathalie translated as well as could be expected, despite our mutually handicapped knowledge of the corresponding terms for binding structures and preservation concepts. Nevertheless, between the three of us speaking in two languages, we managed to carry on a stimulating conversation around the issues of restoration versus conservation, referring to the restored Koran before us, and the overall importance of preservation for this inestimable collection.

Before saying our farewells, we passed through to the Institute for Oriental Languages next door. Where the library is rather plain and functional, the Institute's reception areas and stairways are adorned with lovely Oriental motif frescoes; and the building is constructed around a charming open courtyard. After the brief look at the Institute, it was time to say "au revoir" to Nathalie, and to a fascinating visit.

The magnificent fireworks at the Eiffel Tower, the carousels on the Champs Elysees and the elegant Parisian cuisine remain delightful memories of our winter vacation. For me, meeting an engaging colleague with kindred interests and touring her remarkable library are also extraordinary highlights of our stay in Paris. 

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Ritual manuscript en Arabe Contenant Diverses Prières et Surats du Koran from the Bibliotheque des Langues orientales.